



## Seen and Heard

Their mother disapproved of Doris going to clubs and magnetizing audiences with her rich and expressive voice. But the music found a way to be heard.

As a teenager, Doris got a job as an Apollo usherette, sang at Amateur Night, won, and eventually got discovered by the Godfather of Soul, James Brown. And that's how "music from the church ended up on the Apollo stage," says Higginsen.

Taking the stage name Doris Troy, she had a top 10 hit in 1963 with the love song "Just One Look." The next year, the British group The Hollies covered her song, and her reputation continued to grow. The sisters moved to London together, where they rubbed shoulders with Elton John, The Beatles, and The Rolling Stones in the 1960s and 1970s. Troy impressed The Beatles so much that she got signed by Apple Records and made a solo album produced by George Harrison. Later, she became a backup singer who contributed vocals for The Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, and Carly Simon's "You're So Vain." Though Troy died in 2004, her voice is familiar to millions who might not know her name.

Higginsen was moved to write down her sister's story in the 1983 runaway hit *Mama, I Want to Sing!* She felt it reflected the journeys of a swath of African American artists who similarly grew up with gospel music in their churches and who carried this musical legacy into popular American culture to become stars in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

The gospel musical ran for eight years at Harlem's Heckscher Theater, breaking records, establishing an American classic, and helping preserve the legacy of Black music by acting as a major employer of African American singers and performers throughout its time. Later, it toured nationally and



abroad; it is approaching its 40th anniversary next year.

“When we tell the story of *Mama, I Want to Sing!*, it’s a metaphor for anything anyone ever wanted to do that got blocked or pushed aside or that was not valued or was considered not good enough. All the things that sometimes happen to young people—or to a culture—that it’s felt that your contribution is valueless, unless you’re seen and heard,” Higginsen says.

## **Mama Foundation for the Arts**

After the success of *Mama, I Want to Sing!*, Higginsen was moved to give back to her community and work with young people. Her idea for the Mama Foundation for the Arts came when her daughter, a very musical child, was not receiving music education at school.

“The whole thing started because music was taken out of the school system,” says Higginsen. She and her husband tried enrolling their daughter in a music school where she could learn singing, but the fit just wasn’t right. “They were teaching classical music, but we felt that she needed to sing the music of gospel, jazz, and R&B,” she says.

It dawned on Higginsen that many talented African American children had no options for musical education other than expensive private lessons. The realization that many young Black singers she met were unable to sing gospel told her that the musical heritage was in danger of being lost. So she started a small Saturday singing group with a few students.

Black music history and Black music matter because it is American music. “It’s really important to teach this art form. We don’t want this music to ever die.

“You can’t forget those ancestors whose voices paved the way,” says Higginsen. “Knowing that and celebrating that, we present, we preserve, we promote, and we teach the history and legacy of African American music and its relationship to American history.”

We sometimes forget that Black people were not allowed to read or write, she says. “It was punishable by death. But they were allowed to sing, and through their incredible genius, they used the music as a code to communicate. If someone said, ‘Down by the riverside,’ they knew that meant ‘We’re getting out of here.’”

With her daughter, Ahmaya Knoelle Higginsen, she cofounded the Mama Foundation for the Arts in 2006 to mentor the next generation of Black singers and preserve the musical arts of gospel, jazz, and R&B. Gospel for Teens, their free Saturday program for teenage boys and girls to learn singing and performing, is training young singers to this day.

## **Lifting Up the Music and Young People**

In a decade and a half, the Gospel for Teens Choir has grown from a small weekend gathering into a mighty force in the world. Teens from New York, New Jersey, and surrounding areas have received



this unique opportunity to be supported, learn to find their voices, perform in front of audiences, and be seen and heard.

Each fall, Higginsen signs up a new class of kids. They audition for the choir, but they don't need to read music or have singing experience to join. "If you can carry a tune, we help you develop your own voice," she says.

## Mama Foundation for the Arts

The mission of Mama Foundation for the Arts is to uplift the Black musical treasures of gospel, jazz, and R&B and to heal and inspire through the power of collective music-making. Since 1999, the Mama Foundation has been working to establish itself as a thriving and sustainable Harlem legacy institution where an intergenerational and interracial community is invited to be seen and be heard in the fullness of their experience—their voices, their stories, and their hearts.

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"When you come to our school on a Saturday, you're not going to look at a piece of paper," says Higginsen. "It will be call-and-response. You'll learn the harmony by ear. It's the best thing that can happen to young people."

"This is one of the most underrated teaching styles," she says, noting that the requirement to be able to read music has historically excluded talented Black performers from participating in the music business.

"We use total ear training, breathing, harmony, pitch, and control. You've got to learn by listening, harmonizing, and blending, and you can't look at the music. That style of learning—ear training—is often not acknowledged or appreciated."



These days, Higginsen basks in the successes of students she has nurtured. Though the inspiration for Mama Foundation for the Arts was to save Black musical heritage, the program has saved many a young person along the way.

She says an astonishing 87 percent of the young people who go through the Gospel for Teens program go on to higher education and careers in the entertainment industry or the arts. With *Mama, I Want to Sing!* celebrating its 40th anniversary next year, Higginsen's vision is to keep expanding Mama Foundation for the Arts by adding more staff; finding a larger space to house the students and music masters; expanding to more genres of African American music, such as hip-hop; and continuing to showcase the music.

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